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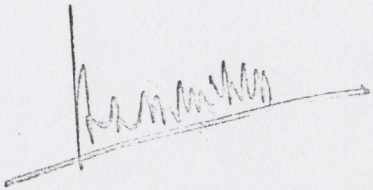
"Generally Political"



"Generally Political"

After damning politicians up hill and down dale for forty years, as rogues and vagabonds, frauds and scoundrels, I sometimes suspect that, like everyone else, I often expect too much of them. Though faith and confidence are surely more or less foreign to my nature, I not infrequently find myself looking to them to be able, diligent, candid, and even honest. Plainly enough, that is too large an order, as anyone must realize who reflects upon the manner in which they reach public office. They seldom if ever get there by merit alone, at least in democratic states. Sometimes, to be sure, it happens, but only by a kind of miracle. They are chosen normally for quite different reasons, the chief of which is simply their power to impress and enchant the intellectually underprivileged. It is a talent like any other, and when it is exercised by a radio crooner, a movie actor or a bishop, it even takes on a certain austere and sorry respectability. But it is obviously not identical with a capacity for the intricate problems of statecraft. Those problems demand for their solution—when they are soluble at all, which is not often—a high degree of technical proficiency, and with it there should go an adamantine kind of integrity, for the temptations of a public official

are almost as cruel as those of a glamour girl or a dipsomaniac. But we train a man for facing them, not by locking him up in a monastery and stuffing him with wisdom and virtue, but by turning him loose on the stump. If he is a smart and enterprising fellow, which he usually is, he quickly discovers there that hooey pleases the boobs a great deal more than sense. Indeed, he finds that sense really disquiets and alarms them—that it makes them, at best, intolerably uncomfortable, just as a tight collar makes them uncomfortable, or a speck of dust in the eye, or the thought of Hell. The truth, to the overwhelming majority of mankind, is indistinguishable from a headache. As I once defined it in a moment of despair, it is something somehow discreditable to someone. After trying a few shots of it on his customers, the larval statesman concludes sadly that it must hurt them, and after that he taps a more humane keg, and in a little while the whole audience is singing "Glory, glory, hallelujah," and when the returns come in the candidate is on his way to the White House.

I hope no one will mistake this brief account of the political process under democracy for exaggeration. It is almost literally true. I do not mean to argue, remember, that all politicians are villains in the sense that a burglar, a child-stealer, or an atheist are villains. Far from it. Many of them, in their private characters, are very excellent per-

sons, and I have known plenty that I'd trust with my diamonds, my daughter or my liberty, if I had any such things. I happen to be acquainted to some extent with nearly all the gentlemen, both Democrats and Republicans, who are currently itching for the Presidency, including the present incumbent, and I testify freely that they are all charming fellows, with merits above rather than below the common. One of them, as you all know, has been praised publicly as a labor-baiting, whiskey-drinking, poker-playing, evil old man—which is certainly no small encomium, considering his advanced age. If I am still that sinful at seventy-one it will be a grand joke on my pastor, and I'll enjoy it much more than anyone else. So with all the other candidates, young and old. The worst of them is a great deal better company than most generals in the army, or writers of murder mysteries, or astrophysicists, and the best is a really superior and wholly delightful man—full of sound knowledge, competent and prudent, frank and courageous, and quite as honest as any American can be without being clapped into a madhouse. Don't ask me what his name is, for I am not in politics. I can only tell you that he has been in public life a long while, and has not been caught yet.

But will this prodigy, or any of the other candidates, really unload any appreciable amount of sagacity on the stump? Will any of them venture

to tell the plain truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about the situation of the country, foreign and domestic? Will any of them refrain from promises that he knows he can't fulfill —that no human being *could* fulfill? Will any of them utter a word, however obvious that will alarm and alienate any of the huge packs of morons who now cluster at the public trough, wallowing in the pap that grows thinner and thinner, hoping against hope? Answer: maybe for a few weeks at the start. Maybe before the campaign really begins. Maybe behind the door. But not after the issue is fairly joined, and the struggle is on in earnest. From that moment they will all resort to demagogy, and by the middle of June the only choice among them will be a choice between amateurs of that science and professionals. They will all promise every man, woman and child in the country whatever he, she or it wants. They'll all be roving the land looking for chances to make the rich poor, to remedy the irremediable, to succor the unsuccorable, to unscramble the unscrambleable, to dephlogisticate the undephlogisticable. They will all be curing warts by saying words over them, and paying off the national debt with money that no one will have to earn. They will dispose of Hitler and Stalin with one hand, and the law of natural selection with the other. When one of them demonstrates that twice two is five, another will prove that it is

six, six-and-a-half, ten, twenty, *n*. In brief, they will divest themselves of their character as sensible, candid and truthful men, and become simply candidates for office, bent only on collaring votes. They will all know by then, even supposing that some of them don't know it now, that votes are collared under democracy, not by talking sense but by talking nonsense, and they will apply themselves to the job with a hearty yo-heave-ho. Most of them, before the uproar is over, will actually convince themselves. The winner will be whoever promises the most with the least probability of delivering anything.

Many years ago—in fact, a ponderable part of a century—I accompanied a candidate for the Presidency on his campaign-tour. He was, like all such rascals, an amusing fellow, and I came to like him very much. His speeches, at the start, were full of fire. He was going to save the country from all the stupendous frauds and false pretenses of his rival. Every time that rival offered to rescue another million of poor fish from the neglects and oversights of God he howled his derision from the back platform of his train. I noticed at once that these blasts of common sense got very little applause, and after a while the candidate began to notice it too. Worse, he began to get word from his spies on the train of his rival that the rival was wowing them, panicking them, laying them in the aisles. They threw flowers, hot-dogs and five-

cent cigars at him. In places where the times were especially hard they tried to unhook the locomotive from his train, so that he'd have to stay with them awhile longer, and promise them some more. There were no Gallup polls in those innocent days, but the local politicians had ways of their own for finding out how the cat was jumping, and they began to join my candidate's train in the middle of the night, and wake him up to tell him that all was lost, including honor. This had some effect upon him—in truth, an effect almost as powerful as that of sitting in the electric chair. He lost his intelligent manner, and became something you could hardly distinguish from an idealist. Instead of mocking he began to promise, and in a little while he was promising everything that his rival was promising, and a good deal more.

One night out in the Bible country, after the hullabaloo of the day was over, I went into his private car along with several other newspaper reporters, and we sat down to gabble with him. One of these reporters, a faithful member of the candidate's own party, began to upbraid him, at first very gently, for letting off so much hokum. What did he mean by making promises that no human being on this earth, and not many of the angels in Heaven, could ever hope to carry out? In particular, what was his idea in trying to work off all those preposterous bile-beans and snake-

oils on the poor farmers, a class of men who had been fooled and rooked by every fresh wave of politicians since Apostolic times? Did he really believe that the Utopia he had begun so fervently to preach would ever come to pass? Did he honestly think that farmers, as a body, would ever see their rosy but insane dreams come true, or that the share-croppers in their lower ranks would ever be more than a hop, skip and jump from starvation? The candidate thought a while, took a long swallow of the coffin-varnish he carried with him, and then replied that the answer in every case was no. He was well aware, he said, that the plight of the farmers was almost hopeless, and would probably continue so for centuries to come. He had no notion that anything could be done about it by merely human means, and certainly not by political means: it would take a new Moses, and a whole series of miracles. "But you forget, Mr. Blank," he concluded sadly, "that our agreement in the premises must remain purely personal. You are not a candidate for office. I am." As we left him the oldest of the reporters, a gentleman grown gray in Washington and long ago lost to every decency, pointed the moral of the episode. "In politics," he said, "a man must learn to rise above principle." Then he drove it in with another; "When the water reaches the upper deck," he said, "follow the rats."

 Some time ago I told this story to one of the men

who is often mentioned for the Presidency today, usually by himself. Rather to my surprise, he was not at all upset, but proceeded to defend his predecessor of long ago. "Such things always happen," he said, "in political campaigns. One party tends inevitably to steal the thunder of the other. I believe that in the long run this is a good thing. It keeps the two major parties from flying too far part, and so converting every change of control into a revolution. We had a good example of the dangers of really radical overturns at the time Mr. Roosevelt became converted to the New Deal, shortly after his inauguration. He tried to launch so many reforms at once that the effect was that of an earthquake, and we were lucky to escape bloodshed. The consequences are still visible. The country is almost in the state of mind that would have followed if he had been made President, not by votes but by bayonets. If the Republicans come in next November they'll have a dreadful time liquidating the New Deal without setting huge armies to marching on Washington, led by jobholders."

So far I have been quoting. My own belief is that there is something in this argument. Whenever democracy really functions, and a new majority proceeds to inflict its ideas on a new minority, without compromise or concession, we have what is really a revolution, and there is a good deal of trouble. This happened with Pro-

hibition, and it happened again with the New Deal. Fortunately for all of us, our usual way is less drastic. Each party steals so many articles of faith from the other, and the candidates spend so much time making each other's speeches, that by the time election day is past there is nothing much to do save turn the sitting rascals out and let a new gang in. This is not theoretical democracy, but it is actual democracy. When the theoretical kind gets a bite at us we always suffer horribly, for theories and theorists are almost as unpleasant as the truth and those who tell it. It is much more comfortable to go on compromising, stalling, talking through hats. The men who get into high office under this system are sometimes anything but museum pieces of conscience, but they are at least better than fanatics. What it means to be run by fanatics was demonstrated during the thirteen dreadful years of Prohibition. Once the Prohibitionists got control, two-thirds of the professional politicians of the country leaped on their bandwagon, and for some years thereafter the United States was one of the Balkan States, and a great deal worse than most.

A long while ago John C. Calhoun wrote a "Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States" that has been completely forgotten, but deserves to be resurrected. In it he argued with great plausibility that actual democracy is almost as bad as government by divine

right—that giving a chance majority an unrestricted franchise to work its wicked will upon the whole country, regardless of the interests and desires of the minority, is simply setting up an irrational and irresponsible tyranny. Other sages have pointed out the same thing, but we are lucky that our actual political system saves us, in ordinary times, from such evil consequences. The majority, despite its theoretical omnipotence, is hobbled by various practical considerations. One is the fact that the public, having only a very feeble development of the mind, changes what little it has very often. That threat is always present, and every politician is constantly conscious of it. Another thing is the fact that the public always tires of its messiahs, and soon or late invariably turns them out, whether they be good, which is uncommon, or bad, which is the rule. Indeed, it usually tries to lynch them in the long run, as the cases of Washington, Wilson and the elder Roosevelt well exhibited. Even Abraham Lincoln, if he had lived, would have ended as a kind of Hoover, distrusted and disliked by whites and blacks alike. He was saved by the bullet of John Wilkes Booth, which made him a martyr and hence beyond the reach of justice. There is enough material in Carl Sandburg's life of Lincoln to make forty Hoovers, with a dozen Hardings and Coolidges to boot.

The third factor that saves us from being saved

too often, and at too great expense, is that fact that professional politicians seldom believe in reform, and almost never in the reforms they advocate. This was demonstrated on a grandiose scale during Prohibition. Probably not a quarter of the statesmen who voted for the Eighteenth Amendment in Congress had any belief in it whatsoever—except, of course, as a means of collaring moron votes. Some of these official drys were the real master boozers of the thirteen dreadful years, headed by the sainted Harding. I knew not a few of them who got down so much alcohol that it was impossible to freeze them in Winter, even though they lay in the gutter outside a Washington speakeasy, with five feet of snow over them. When Prohibition finally blew up with a bang they went wet overnight, and with almost as much fervor publicly as they had been showing privately. As I recall it, more than 200 of them were converted instantly and in a body—a magnificent example of the power of reason upon inanimate matter. One day they were taking orders from Bishop Cannon, and the next day they were talking of hanging him. The Bishop himself, an agreeable fellow despite his sepulchral office and his dislike of the human race, was not surprised. In fact, he was less surprised than I was, though I had been predicting such a wholesale conversion for some years. He had been in politics up to his ears for a generation, and was well aware of the

nature of politicians. He knew that they were chronic antidotes to the great boons and usufructs they whooped up.

The same thing is now happening in Washington all over again, and if there had been no war in Europe it would have been plainly visible today. Not half of the Senators and Congressmen who were lately supporting the New Deal really believed in it, or made any effort to conceal that fact behind the curtain. They went along simply because it seemed the smart and profitable thing to do. They would have been in favor of Fascism, Communism, Zoroastrianism, or even cannibalism under the same circumstances. A year or so ago, when it began to appear that the New Deal was making heavy weather of it, and that the great masses of the plain people had got an overdose of Roosevelt and were longing for another and worse, these statesmen lost a great deal of their former enthusiasm for Utopia, and took to sabotage. The Hon. John Nance Garner was certainly not the worst; he was simply the first. After a while he became so bold that he actually began to talk treason with the door *open*.

Well, if you think that all this is pessimism, then you are mistaken. For democracy in general, I have no great taste, just as I have no great taste for other forms of virtue. But there are some things in it that seem to me to be very valuable—at all events, to me personally. I enjoy living in a

country where government is a creature of purely delegated powers, with no inherent rights of its own. And I enjoy the right of free speech, even when it is employed to argue–and prove–that I am in the pay of Wall Street. For the rest I care little. Having no desire for public office and being by birth a member of the bloated and nefarious bourgeoisie, well crammed with vitamins from the age of two or three hours, I am not interested in the fact that any poor boy may become President. Nor does it give my any thrill to hear that my vote is as good as that of the president of Harvard –and no better than that of a share-cropper in Arkansas. But, as I have said, I enjoy talking, and I agree with Thomas Jefferson that the best government is the weakest. Unfortunately, Jefferson's idea is now out of the window, along with his idea that public debts are public misfortunes, and will have to be repaid soon or late in either money or blood. How long the right to free speech will last I don't know, but if the New Dealers try to save their hides by horning into the war it probably won't be long.

In this country, as everywhere else, government is only a sorry compromise, a half loaf that is better, so we assume, than no bread at all. The human race has never succeeded in fashioning a government that was even 20 per cent good. The effort is always a failure, here, there and everywhere. It is mankind's most gorgeous flop. In

some respects our own failure is worse than the average, but in other respects it is probably better. Our system of checks and balances, the pride of our trusting hearts, is really not between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary, but between the people and the politicians of the country, which is to say, between its fools and its rogues. The people keep the politicians from stealing too much, and the politicians keep the people from getting too crazy. If it were not for the knavery of politicians the Townsend Plan would be the law of the land at this moment. Old Dr. Townsend, a couple of years ago, had more than half the candidates for Congress, regardless of party, on his mourners' bench. But the moment his back was turned most of them bolted, and so the country was saved once more from being saved. On the other hand, the people perform a valuable service every time they rise up for some possibly good but usually bad reason, and throw the politicians of a whole party out. It doesn't make much difference whether the victims are Democrats or Republicans, Liberals or Tories, mere pickpockets or downright burglars. The essential thing is they are thrown out. The experience chastens them, at least until they can get back.

It is thus, under democracy, that we live and have our being. It is thus that the imperishable ideals of the Founding Fathers are preserved, or,

at all events, embalmed. The process, described in cold and rigid scientific terms, as I have described it here, is not a pretty one, but neither is any other biological process pretty. Certainly those that have been set going in other countries are no better. We shudder as we think of them—though most of us have a sneaking yearning for some element of one or another of them. Let us be content with what we have, and thank God that it is no worse. Say what you will against it, you must always admit in the end that it makes a great show. A national campaign is better than the best circus ever heard of, with a mass baptism and a couple of hangings thrown in. It is better, even, than war. If I am alive come September, I'll follow the next one from the opening prayer of the first national convention to the terminal cries of fraud, and with unfailing zest and edification. I have been doing so since 1904, and am still thirsty for more. But one war was enough to content me for life, just as I was satisfied by one attack of delirium tremens.

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